

*Ruskin Bond
under the benedictory pines*

RUSKIN BOND's name conjures up vivid images of windswept valleys, stately pines and the pristine Himalayas. It takes a writer of Bond's calibre to weave nature, animals, humans and ghosts together into a light-hearted book: **TIGERS FOREVER**. A collection of poems and stories, this book is a refreshing blend of nature and adventure, mystery and suspense, humour and fantasy.

Having lived close to nature for most part of his life, Ruskin Bond's innate love for nature is sensitively reflected throughout the book.

All characters and events come alive through the illustrations drawn by *Tapas Guha*, in his inimitable style. This is what the author has to say about them:

*The illustrations are excellent
Ruskin Bond*



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RUSKIN BOND



Tigers Forever

POEMS AND STORIES

RUSKIN BOND

TIGERS FOREVER

Poems and Stories

Designed and illustrated by

TAPAS GUHA



Ratna Sagar

FOR
SHRISHTI
WHEN SHE IS A LITTLE BIGGER

First published 1996

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May there always be tigers.

TIGERS FOREVER

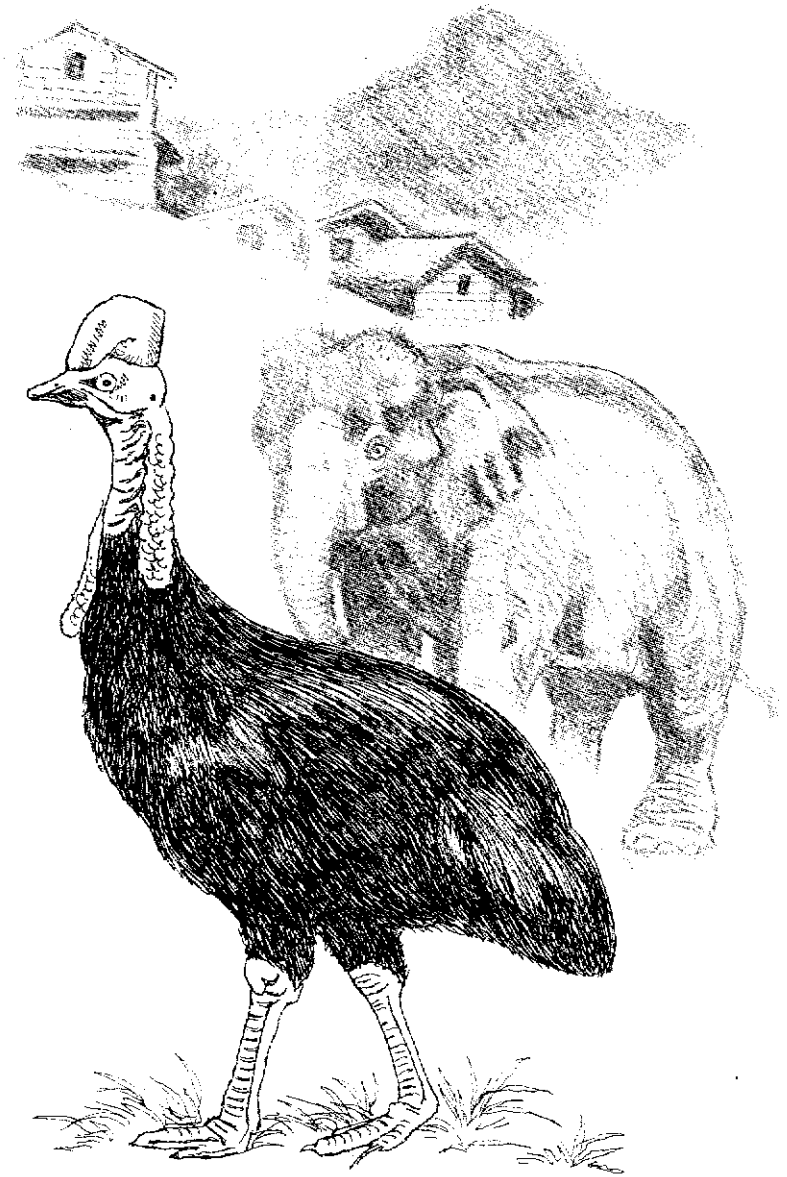
May there always be tigers.
In the jungles and tall grass
May the tiger's roar be heard,
May his thunder
Be known in the land.
At the forest pool, by moonlight
May he drink and raise his head
Scenting the night wind.
May he crouch low in the grass
When the herdsmen pass,
And slumber in dark caverns
When the sun is high.
May there always be tigers.
But not so many, that one of them
Might be tempted to come into my room
In search of a meal!

THE ELEPHANT AND THE CASSOWARY BIRD



The baby elephant wasn't out of place in our home in north India because India is where elephants belong, and in any case our house was full of pets brought home by Grandfather, who was in the Forest Service. But the cassowary bird was different. No one had ever seen such a bird before—not in India, that is. Grandfather had picked it up on a voyage to Singapore, where he'd been given the bird by a rubber-planter who'd got it from a Dutch trader who'd got it from a man in Indonesia.

Anyway, it ended up at our home in Dehra, and seemed to do quite well in the sub-tropical climate. It looked like a cross between a turkey and an ostrich, but bigger than the former and smaller than the latter—about five feet in height. It was not a beautiful bird, nor even a friendly one, but it had come to stay, and everyone was curious about it, especially the baby elephant.



Right from the start the baby elephant took a great interest in the cassowary, a bird unlike any found in the Indian jungles.

Right from the start the baby elephant took a great interest in the cassowary, a bird unlike any found in the Indian jungles. He would circle round the odd creature, and diffidently examine with his trunk the texture of its stumpy wings; of course he suspected no evil, and his childlike curiosity encouraged him to take liberties which resulted in an unpleasant experience.

Noticing the baby elephant's attempts to make friends with the rather morose cassowary, we felt a bit apprehensive. Self-contained and sullen, the big bird responded only by slowly and slyly raising one of its powerful legs, in the meantime gazing into space with an innocent air. We knew what the gesture meant; we had seen that treacherous leg raised on many an occasion, and suddenly shooting out with a force that would have done credit to a vicious camel. In fact, camel and cassowary kicks are delivered on the same plan, except that the camel kicks backward like a horse and the bird forward.

We wished to spare our baby elephant a painful experience, and led him away from the bird. But he persisted in his friendly overtures, and one morning he received an ugly reward. Rapid as lightning, the cassowary hit straight from the hip and knee joints, and the elephant ran squealing to Grandfather.

For several days he avoided the cassowary, and we thought he had learnt his lesson. He crossed and recrossed the compound and the garden, swinging his trunk, thinking furiously. Then, a week later, he appeared on the verandah

at breakfast time in his usual cheery, childlike fashion, sidling up to the cassowary as if nothing had happened.

We were struck with amazement at this and so, it seemed, was the bird. Had the painful lesson already been forgotten, and by a member of the elephant tribe noted for its ability never to forget? Another dose of the same medicine would serve the booby right.

The cassowary once more began to draw up its fighting leg with sinister determination. It was nearing the true position for the master-kick, kung fu style, when all of a sudden the baby elephant seized with his trunk the cassowary's other leg and pulled it down. There was a clumsy flapping of wings, a tremendous swelling of the bird's wattle, and an undignified getting up, as if it were a floored boxer doing his best to beat the count of ten. The bird then marched off with an attempt to look stately and unconcerned, while we at the breakfast-table were convulsed with laughter.

After this the cassowary bird gave the baby elephant as wide a berth as possible. But they were not forced to co-exist for very long. The baby elephant, getting bulky and cumbersome, was sold and now lives in a zoo where he is a favourite with young visitors who love to take rides on his back.

As for the cassowary, he continued to grace our verandah for many years, gaped at but not made much of, while entering on a rather friendless old age.



THE BOY WHO COULD SEE FOOTSTEPS



About fifty miles from the city of Benares, in India, there once lived, in a great dark cave, a creature called a Yakka. She had the face of a horse and the body of a woman. She was strong and fierce as a tigress. And she lived upon the flesh of any man or beast whom she could trap.

One day the Yakka caught a school teacher who was travelling alone towards Benares. She carried him off with great swiftness into her cave. When she saw that he was young and handsome, she asked him whether, if she spared his life, he would marry her. And the teacher, thinking that of two evils this would be the lesser, agreed to become her husband.

Afterwards the Yakka grew more and more humane and gentle, gave up eating people and tried in various ways to improve her mind. However, she always feared that her

teacher-husband would run away if he could, so she used to roll a huge stone in front of the entrance to the cave whenever she went out to collect food. And in this way the poor teacher was kept a prisoner.

The Yakka was happy enough, and spent her days lying in wait for passing caravans. Fearful travellers were only too ready to part with food and spices, and upon these the Yakka and her husband lived. At length a little son was born to them. In spite of being cooped up in a dark, cold cave, he grew into a strong and clever boy. The Yakka was devoted to him and did all she could to make him and his father comfortable and happy. But the poor teacher pined for freedom. He longed for sunshine and fresh breezes, for the sights and sounds of the city.

One day his son said to him, "Father, why is my mother's face so different from ours?"



"Because she is a Yakka, son, and we are men."

"Then why do we live with her in this gloomy cave, instead of among our fellows?"

"Because of the great stone which the Yakka rolls in front of the cave's entrance. It is too heavy for me to move. But you have your mother's strength—see if you can move it."

The boy sprang up and, setting his shoulder to the stone, easily rolled it aside. He seized his father by the hand and they ran until the teacher, unused to the light and air, became half-blind and dizzy from the exertion. Even the boy was breathless. They sat down to rest; but, before they had recovered enough to go on, they heard the thud of the Yakka's feet in pursuit, and she soon caught up with them.

"Oh, thankless husband and more thankless child!" she cried. "Why do you run away? What did you lack in my home? You lay upon beds of leaf and moss. You ate dates and drank the wine of pomegranates."

"But, Mother," answered the boy, "we lack air and light, and these are more necessary to us than wine and dates."

"Come back with me and you shall have both," she said. So they returned, and she broke the great stone into splinters, and allowed them to wander into the woods and up and down the road; but whenever they got more than a kilometre away from the cave they would always hear her great feet thudding after them.

One day the boy found out that his mother's power extended only as far as the river one way, and as far as the mountains the other way. So when she was fast asleep, on

a dark night, he and his father crept out of the cave and fled towards the river. They had just managed to reach the bank when they heard the sound of the Yakka's feet thudding after them. But the boy did not pause. He hoisted his father on his back and waded up to his waist in the stream. Then, safe from the Yakka's power, he looked back.

"Come back, come back!" she cried.

"I will return one day," replied the boy. "We are men, and it is right that we should dwell among men. But you are my mother and have given me your love. I will return."

The Yakka knelt upon the river bank and wept tears into the running water; but father and son had already made their way to the other bank. She no longer pleaded with them; but, because she loved her child dearly, she told him he should take from her a talisman that should prove of great value to him in the world of men.

"Take this stone," she said, throwing it across to him, "and hang it about your neck. By its power you will be able to see footsteps even twelve years after they have been made upon the ground by the feet of men."

The boy caught the stone and fastened it round his neck. Then, waving goodbye, he and his father took the road to Benares. All the way the boy saw thousands of footprints—prints that had long since disappeared from the sight of ordinary humans—and at first he was confused by these tell-tale signs of the men and women who had come and gone that way over the years; but he soon got used to them, and even began to single out the more interesting footprints,



The next night two thieves broke into the vaults where the treasure was kept.

and by the time they reached Benares he had come to the conclusion that no two footprints were the same.

As soon as they arrived in the city, they went straight to the king's palace, where the boy's father was appointed a teacher in a school for young princes. The king soon heard from his ministers that the teacher's son had the power of seeing long-vanished footsteps.

"Should any robber tamper with the king's treasury, my son can trace the thief and find the valuables," the teacher announced to the chief minister. "Why not ask your royal master to take the boy into his service?"

The king was only too glad to do so, for he was extremely rich and miserly, and lived in daily and nightly fear of being robbed.

"How much does this boy expect us to pay him?" was his first question.

"A thousand rupees daily," said the minister.

"Too much, too much!" complained the king. But the boy held out for that sum, and the king at last agreed to it.

Some months passed and, as the fame of the boy's gift passed through Benares, no attempts were made to rob the treasury.

The king was still unhappy about the fee he was paying the boy. "How are we to know that he is not an impostor?" he complained. "We are paying him a thousand rupees daily, and he does nothing but sit upon an expensive rug near my marble fountain, playing chess with his father and drinking lemonade! I'm being cheated!"

The next night two thieves broke into the vaults where the treasure was kept. They took many jewels and much money, which they placed in sacks. Then they walked three times round the palace, passed through the gardens, climbed the wall by means of a ladder and finally reached a tank in the middle of a meadow. They dropped the sacks into the tank and then disappeared into the night.

Next day the king raised a terrible outcry. Some of the most precious of the crown jewels had been stolen! The thief must be found! Where was the boy who could see footsteps?

"Here I am, sire," said the boy, hurrying to the king's audience chamber. "I shall trace the thieves at once!"

And starting from the vaults, he walked three times round the palace, passed through the gardens, climbed the wall at a certain spot and finally reached the tank in the meadow. He ordered a diver to enter the water and bring up whatever he could find at the bottom.

"I have seen the footsteps of two men all the way," he said, "and they are men of distinction."

For some moments there was deep silence as they all stood around gazing down into the tank.

People clapped and cheered as the diver brought up, one by one, the bags full of treasure. But the king, who appeared disappointed to see how well the boy was earning his salary, whispered to his minister, "This is all very well. He has recovered the treasure. But can he trace the thieves? Let us test him further." And turning to the boy, he said aloud, "Now find me these thieves."

"That should not be necessary now that the jewels and money are recovered," said the boy thoughtfully.

But the king insisted. "I shall cut your salary by half if you cannot find the thieves. My heart longs to punish those rascals."

"Be careful of what you say, sire," said the boy. "If it is someone upon whom the people depend, what shall the people do?"

"Punish him, of course!" said the king, laughing.

"Shall I name the thieves, then?" asked the boy for the last time.

"Yes, or I cut your thousand rupees daily down to a hundred!"

"Yourself and your minister, O king! You are the thieves!"

And when the people learned that their rulers stooped to all this trickery to fill their private coffers with wealth that should have been used for the benefit of the kingdom, they decided that these two were not worthy to hold positions of trust over them. So they dethroned the king and exiled him and his minister, and gave the crown to the boy who saw their footsteps.

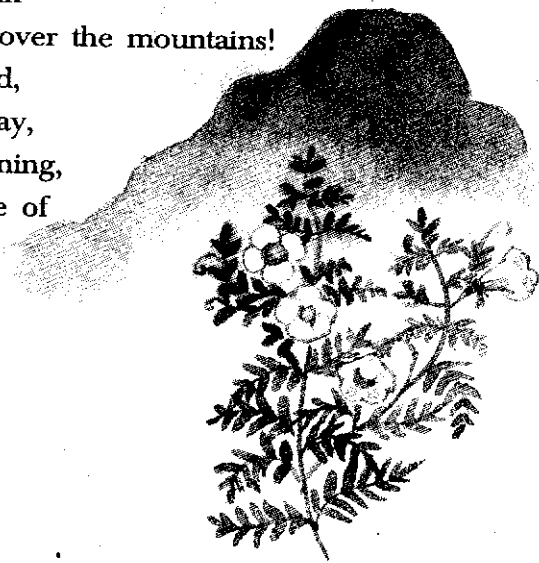
And did the boy ever see his mother, the Yakka, again?

No one knew for certain, but it was said that he would mysteriously disappear on full-moon nights. And although his ministers followed him to try and find out where he went, they never succeeded, because the boy was careful not to leave any footprints of his own.



SUNRISE

New day!
I run to meet it.
Over the grass still damp
From last night's rain
Over the brow of the hill
To watch the sun
Come shouting over the mountains!
Thank you, Lord,
For each new day,
Each new beginning,
And the promise of
days to come.



THE WHITE ELEPHANT



Long ago, when animals could talk like humans, a great herd of elephants lived in a forest near the Himalaya mountains. The finest elephant in the tribe was a rare white animal.

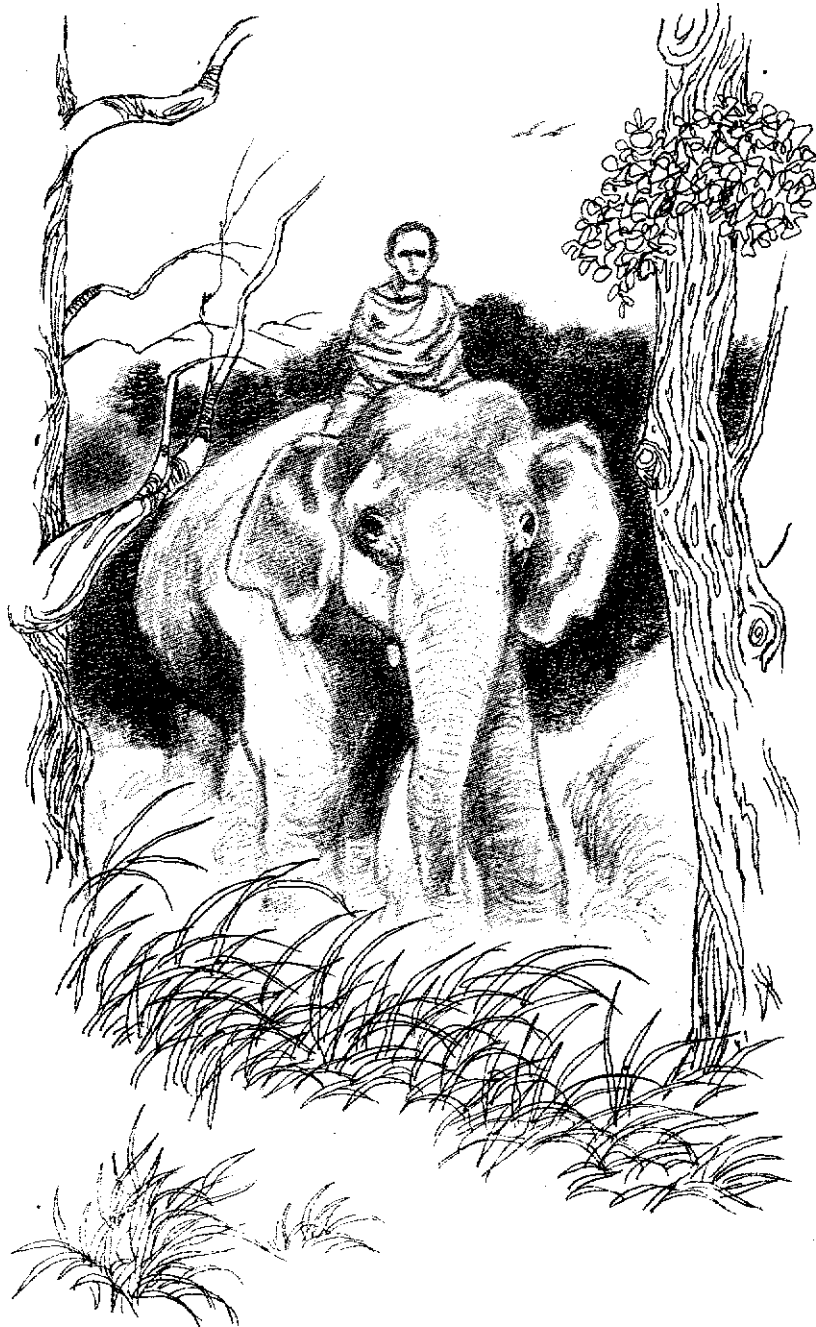
Unfortunately the mother of this elephant was old and blind and although her son gathered sweet wild fruits for her every day, he was often angry to find the other elephants had stolen his mother's food.

"Mother," he said, "it would be better if you and I were to go and live alone in a distant cave I have discovered."

The mother elephant agreed and for a time the two of them lived happily in a peaceful spot near a glade of wild fruit trees. Until one evening they heard loud cries coming from the great forest.

"That is the voice of a man in distress," said the white elephant. "I must go and see if I can help him."

"Do not go, my son," said his mother. "I am old and blind but I know the ways of human beings towards us."



*"Climb on my back," said the elephant cheerfully,
"and I will carry you home."*

"Your goodness will be rewarded by treachery."

But the white elephant could not bear to think of anyone in trouble and he hurried down to the lake in the direction of the cries, where he discovered a man who was a forester.

"Don't fear me, stranger," he said. "Tell me how I can help you."

The forester told the white elephant he had been lost for seven days and nights and could not find his way back to Benares where he lived.

"Climb on my back," said the elephant cheerfully, "and I will carry you home."

The elephant carried the man swiftly through the forest until they reached open country; then he left him on the outskirts of the city before returning to his cave.

Now the forester was a greedy and cunning man and he knew that before he left Benares, the king's favourite elephant had died. "The king would reward me richly," thought the man, "if I captured this fine animal for him," and straightaway he asked for a royal audience.

The king was delighted with the description of the white elephant. "I would love to possess such a fine creature. Go back to the forest with a band of my most skilful trainers and if they succeed in capturing this rare elephant, you shall be well rewarded."

The forester had cunningly noted landmarks while riding back to Benares and he led the trainers to the lake where the white elephant was gathering bamboo stems for his mother's evening meal. When the elephant saw the

forester with the band of trainers, he knew he had been betrayed.

He tried to escape but the trainers pursued him and soon succeeded in capturing him. Then they led him through the forest and entered Benares in triumph.

The poor mother elephant, waiting for her son to return, felt certain that he had been captured.

"What shall I do without him," she cried. "Who will bring me food and lead me to the lotus lake for water."

The heart of her son was equally heavy. 'What will she do without me,' he thought, 'if only I had listened to her advice.'

In spite of his unhappy look the elephant found favour with the king, who declared he would ride no other animal. The elephant's stable was richly decorated in his honour and the king rode him in state through the city.

But a few days later the trainers came to the king in great distress saying, "Your Majesty, the white elephant is very sick and will eat nothing."

The king hurried to the stable and when he saw the elephant's look of despair, he said, "Good animal, how you have changed! Why do you refuse to eat? Anything you wish will be granted to you."

"Great King," answered the elephant mournfully, "all I desire is to return to my poor blind mother in the forest, for while she is alone and starving, how can I eat?"

Now the king was a good king and although he badly wanted the elephant for himself, he said at once, "Noble

animal, your goodness puts mankind to shame. I give you your freedom to return to your mother at once."

The elephant thanked the king with a loud trumpeting, and left the city and went crashing back through the forest. When he reached the cave, he found to his joy that his mother was still alive.

"Ah, my son!" she said when he told her his story. "You should have listened to me. Human beings have always brought harm to our race."

"Not all of them, mother," he said triumphantly. "The king is noble and generous or I should still be in captivity. Let's forget the treachery of the forester and think only of the king's goodness!"



THE BLACK CAT

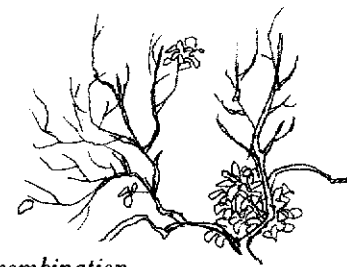


Before the cat came, there had, of course, to be a broomstick.

In the bazaar of one of our hill-stations is an old junk shop, dirty, dingy and dark, in which I often potter about looking for old books or Victorian bric-a-brac. Sometimes one comes across useful household items, but I do not usually notice these. I was, however, attracted to an old but well-preserved broom standing in a corner of the shop. A long-handled broom was just what I needed. I had no servant to sweep out the rooms of my cottage, and I did not enjoy bending over double when using the common short-handled jharoo.

The old broom was priced at three rupees. I haggled with the shopkeeper and got it for two.

It was a strong broom, full of character, and I used it to good effect almost every morning. And there this story might have ended (or would never have begun) if I had not found the large black cat sitting on the garden wall.



A cat and a broomstick—the combination was suggestive, full of possibilities. . . .

The black cat had bright yellow eyes, and it gave me a long, penetrating look, as though it were summing up my possibilities as an exploitable human. Though it miaowed once or twice, I paid no attention: I did not much care for cats. But when I went indoors, I found that the cat had followed and begun scratching at the pantry door.

"It must be hungry," I said and gave it some milk.

The cat lapped up the milk, purring deeply all the while, then sprang up on a cupboard and made itself comfortable.

Well, for several days there was no getting rid of that cat. It made itself at home, merely tolerating my presence in the house. It seemed more interested in my broom than in me, and would dance and skittle round the broom whenever I was sweeping the rooms. And when the broom was resting against the wall, the cat would sidle up to it, rubbing itself against the handle and purring loudly.

A cat and a broomstick—the combination was suggestive, full of possibilities. . . . The cottage was old, almost a hundred years old, and I wondered about the kind of tenants it might have had during that long time. I had been in the cottage for only a year. And though it stood alone in the midst of a forest of Himalayan oaks, I had never encountered any ghosts or spirits.

Miss Bellows came to see me in the middle of July. I heard the tapping of a walking-stick on the rocky path outside the cottage, a tapping which stopped near the gate.

"Mr Bond!" called an imperious voice. "Are you at home?"

I had been doing some gardening, and looked up to find an elderly, straight-backed woman peering at me over the gate.

"Good evening," I said, dropping my hoe.

"I believe you have my cat," said Miss Bellows.

Though I had not met the lady before, I knew her by name and reputation. She was the oldest resident in the hill-station.

"I believe I have a cat," I said, "though it's probably more correct to say that the cat has me. If she's your cat, you're welcome to her. Why don't you come in while I look for her?"

Miss Bellows stepped in. She wore a rather old-fashioned black dress, and her strong, ancient walnut stick had two or three curves in it and a knob instead of a handle.

She made herself comfortable in an armchair while I went in search of the cat. But the cat was on one of her mysterious absences, and though I called for her in my most persuasive manner, she did not respond. I knew she was probably quite near. But cats are like that—perverse, obstinate creatures.

When, finally, I returned to the sitting-room, there was the cat, curled up on Miss Bellows' lap.

"Well, you've got her, I see. Would you like some tea before you go?"

"No, thank you," said Miss Bellows. "I don't drink tea."

"Something stronger, perhaps. A little brandy?" She looked up at me rather sharply. Disconcerted, I hastened to

add, "Not that I drink much, you know. I keep a little in the house for emergencies. It helps to ward off colds and things. It's particularly good for—er—well, for colds," I finished lamely.

"I see your kettle's boiling," she said. "Can I have some hot water?"

"Hot water? Certainly." I was a little puzzled, but I did not wish to antagonize Miss Bellows at our first meeting.

"Thank you. And a glass."

She held the glass while I held the kettle. Then from the pocket of her voluminous dress she extracted two small packets, similar to those containing chemists' powders. Opening both packets, she poured first a purple powder, and then a crimson powder, into the glass. Nothing happened.

"Now the water, please," she said.

"It's boiling hot!"

"Never mind."

I poured boiling water into her glass, and there was a terrific fizzing and bubbling as the frothy stuff rose to the rim. It gave off a horrible stench. The potion was so hot that I thought it would crack the glass; but before this could happen, Miss Bellows had put it to her lips and drained off its entire contents.

"I think I'll be going now," she said, putting the glass down and smacking her lips. The cat, tail in the air, voiced its agreement. Said Miss Bellows, "I'm much obliged to you, young man."

"Don't mention it," I said humbly. "Always at your service."

She gave me her thin, bony hand, and held mine in an icy grip.

I saw Miss Bellows and the black cat to the gate, and returned pensively to my sitting-room. Living alone was beginning to tell on my nerves and imagination. I made a half-hearted attempt to laugh at my fancies, but the laugh stuck in my throat: I couldn't help noticing that the broom was missing from its corner.

I dashed out of the cottage and looked up and down the path. There was no one to be seen. In the gathering darkness I could hear Miss Bellows' laughter, followed by a snatch of song:

*"With the darkness round me growing,
And the moon behind my hat,
You will soon have trouble knowing
Which is witch and Witch's Cat."*

Something whirred overhead like a Diwali rocket.

I looked up and saw them silhouetted against the rising moon. Miss Bellows and her cat were riding away on my broomstick.



THE SNAKE

When, after days of rain,
The sun appears,
The snake emerges
Green-gold on the grass.
Kept in so long,
He basks for hours,
Soaks up the hot bright sun.
Knowing how shy he is of me,
I walk a gentle pace,
Letting him doze in peace.
But to the snake, earth-bound,
Each step must sound like thunder.
He glides away,
Goes underground.
I've known him for some years:
A harmless green grass-snake
Who, when he sees me on the path,
Uncoils and disappears.



COPPERFIELD IN THE JUNGLE



Grandfather never hunted wild animals; he could not understand the pleasure some people obtained from killing the creatures of our forests. Birds and animals, he felt, had as much right to live as humans. There was some justification in killing for food—most animals did—but none at all in killing just for the fun of it.

At the age of twelve, I did not have the same high principles as grandfather. Nevertheless, I disliked anything to do with shikar or hunting. I found it terribly boring.

Uncle Henry and some of his sporting friends once took me on a shikar expedition into the Terai forests of the Siwaliks. The prospect of a whole week in the jungle as camp-follower to several adults with guns filled me with dismay. I knew that long, weary hours would be spent tramping behind these tall, professional-looking hunters. They could only speak in terms of bagging this tiger or that wild elephant, when all they ever got, if they were lucky, was a wild hare or a partridge. Tigers and excitement,

it seemed, came only to Jim Corbett.

This particular expedition proved to be different from others. There were four men with guns, and at the end of the week, all that they had shot were two miserable, underweight wild fowls. But I managed, on our second day in the jungle, to be left behind at the rest-house. And, in the course of a morning's exploration of the old bungalow, I discovered a shelf of books half-hidden in a corner of the back verandah.

Who had left them there? A literary forest officer? A memsahib who had been bored by her husband's camp-fire boasting? Or someone who had no interest in the 'manly' sport of slaughtering wild animals and had brought his library along to pass the time?

Or possibly the poor fellow had gone into the jungle one day, as a gesture towards his more bloodthirsty companions, and been trampled by an elephant, or gored by a wild boar, or (more likely) accidentally shot by one of the shikaris—and his sorrowing friends had taken his remains away and left his books behind.

Anyway, there they were—a shelf of some thirty volumes, obviously untouched for many years. I wiped the thick dust off the covers and examined the titles. As my reading tastes had not yet formed, I was willing to try anything. The bookshelf was varied in its contents—and my own interests have since remained fairly universal.

On that fateful day in the forest rest-house, I discovered P. G. Wodehouse and read his *Love Among The Chickens*, an

early Ukridge story and still one of my favourites. By the time the perspiring hunters came home late in the evening, with their spent cartridges and lame excuses, I had made a start with M. R. James's *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, which had me hooked on ghost stories for the rest of my life. It kept me awake most of the night, until the oil in the kerosene lamp had finished.

Next morning, fresh and optimistic again, the shikaris set out for a different area, where they hoped to 'bag a tiger'. They had employed a party of villagers to beat the jungle, and all day I could hear their drums throbbing in the distance. This did not prevent me from finishing M. R. James or discovering a book called *A Naturalist on the Prowl* by EHA*.

My concentration was disturbed only once, when I looked up and saw a spotted deer crossing the open clearing in front of the bungalow. The deer disappeared among the sal trees, and I returned to my book.

Dusk had fallen when I heard the party returning from the hunt. The great men were talking loudly and seemed excited. Perhaps they had got their tiger. I put down my book and came out to meet them.

"Did you shoot the tiger?" I asked excitedly.

"No, my boy," said Uncle Henry. "I think we'll bag it tomorrow. But you should have been with us—we saw a spotted deer!"

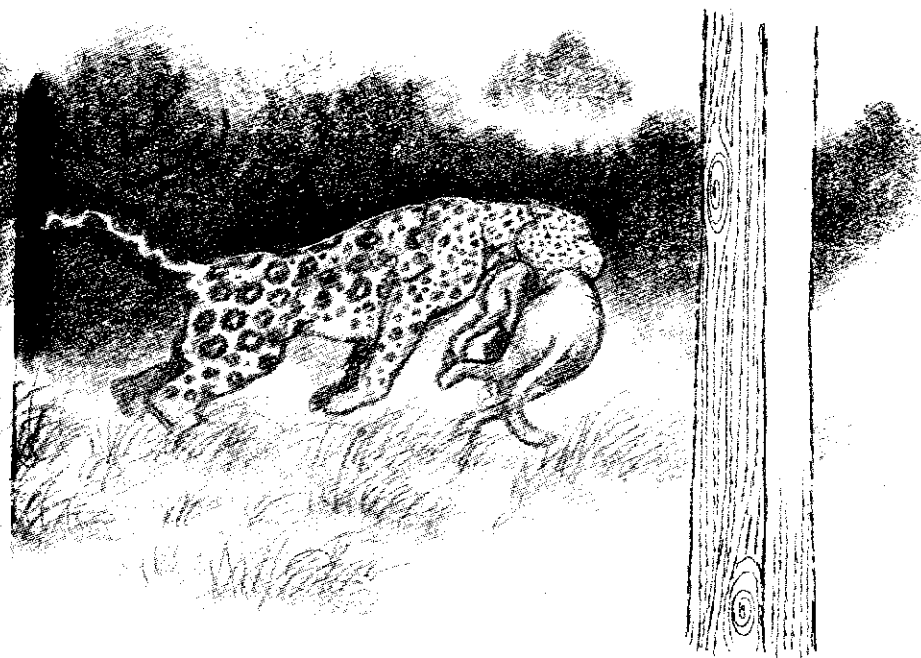
*Edward Hamilton Aitken—a naturalist writer of India



There were three days left and I knew I would never get through the entire bookshelf. So I chose *David Copperfield*—my first encounter with Dickens—and settled down on the verandah armchair to make the acquaintance of Mr Micawber and his family, Aunt Betsy Trotwood, Mr Dick, Peggotty, and a host of other larger-than-life people. I think it would be true to say that *David Copperfield* set me off on the road to literature; I identified with young David and wanted to grow up to be a writer like him.

But on my second day with the book an event occurred which disturbed my reading for a little while.

I had noticed, on the previous day, that a number of stray dogs—belonging to watchmen, villagers and forest-guards—always hung about the house, waiting for scraps of food to be thrown away. It was ten o'clock in the morning,



a time when wild animals seldom come into the open, when I heard a sudden yelp in the clearing. Looking up, I saw a large leopard making off into the jungle with one of the dogs held in its jaws. The leopard had either been driven towards the house by the beaters, or had watched the party leave the bungalow and decided to help itself to a meal.

There was no one else about at the time. Since the dog was obviously dead within seconds of being seized, and the leopard had disappeared, I saw no point in raising an alarm which would have interrupted my reading. So I returned to *David Copperfield*.

It was getting late when the shikaris returned. They were dirty, sweaty, and as usual, disappointed. Next day we were to return to the city, and none of the hunters had anything

to show for a week in the jungle. Swear words punctuated their conversation.

"No game left in these . . . jungles," said the leading member of the party, famed for once having shot two man-eating tigers and a basking crocodile in rapid succession.

"It's this beastly weather," said Uncle Henry. "No rain for months."

"I saw a leopard this morning," I said modestly.

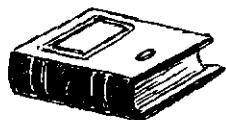
But no one took me seriously. "Did you really?" said the leading hunter, glancing at the book beside me. "Young Master Copperfield says he saw a leopard!"

"Too imaginative for his age," said Uncle Henry. "Comes from reading too much, I suppose."

"If you were to get out of the house and into the jungle," said the third member, "you might really see a leopard! Don't know what young chaps are coming to these days."

I went to bed early and left them to their tales of the 'good old days' when rhinos, cheetahs, and possibly even the legendary phoenix were still available for slaughter.

Next day the camp broke up and we went our different ways. I was still only half-way through *David Copperfield*, but I saw no reason why it should be left behind to gather dust for another thirty years, and so I took it home with me. I have it still, a reminder of how I failed as a shikari but launched myself on a literary career.



A LITTLE WORLD OF MUD



I had never realised there was much to be found in the rain-water pond behind our house in north India except for large quantities of mud and sometimes a water-buffalo.

It was Grandfather who introduced me to the pond's diversity of life, so beautifully arranged that each individually gained some benefit from the well-being of the mass. To the inhabitants of the pond, the pond was the world; and to the inhabitants of the world, maintained Grandfather, the world was but a muddy pond.

When Grandfather first showed me the pond-world, he chose a dry place in the shade of an old peepul tree, where we sat for an hour, gazing steadily at the thin green scum on the water.

The buffaloes had not arrived for their afternoon dip, and the surface of the pond was still.

For the first ten minutes we saw nothing. Then a small black blob appeared in the middle of the pond; gradually



At about four o'clock in the morning the entire household was awakened by a loud and fearful noise, . . .

it rose higher, until at last we could make out a frog's head, its great eyes staring hard at us. He did not know if we were friend or enemy and kept his body out of sight. A heron, his mortal enemy, might have been wading about in search of him.

When he had made sure we were not herons, he informed his friends and neighbours, and soon there were several big heads and eyes just above the surface of the water. Throats swelled, and a *wurk, wurk, wurk* began.

In the shallow water near the tree we could see a dark shifting shadow. When touched with the end of a stick, the dark mass immediately became alive. Thousands of little black tadpoles wriggled into life, pushing and hustling each other.

"What do tadpoles eat?" I asked.

"They eat each other most of the time," said Grandfather. "It may seem an unpleasant custom, but when you think of the thousands of tadpoles that are hatched, you'll realise what a useful system it is. If all the young tadpoles in this pond became frogs, they'd take up every inch of ground between here and the house!"

"Their croaking would certainly drive Grandmother crazy," I said.

All the same, I took home a number of frogs, placed them in a large glass jar, and left them on the window-sill of my bedroom.

At about four o'clock in the morning the entire household was awakened by a loud and fearful noise, and my grandparents, aunts and servants gathered on the verandah

for safety. They were furious when they discovered that my frogs were the cause of the noise. Seeing the dawn breaking, the frogs had with one accord begun their morning songs.

Grandmother wanted to throw the frogs, bottle and all, out of the window; but Grandfather gave the bottle a good shaking and the frogs stayed quiet. Everyone went back to bed, but I was obliged to stay awake, to shake the bottle whenever the frogs showed signs of bursting into song. Long before breakfast, I had let them loose in the garden.

I was soon visiting the pond on my own. Exploring its banks and shallows; and taking off my shoes, I would wade into the muddy water up to my knees, and pluck the water-lilies floating on the surface.

One day, when I reached the pond. I found it occupied by buffaloes. Their owner, a boy a little older than me, was swimming about in the middle of the pond. He pulled himself up on the back of one of his buffaloes, stretched his slim brown body out on the animal's glistening back and started singing to himself.

When the boy saw me staring at him, he smiled, showing gleaming white teeth in his dark, sun-burnished face. He invited me into the water for a swim. I told him I couldn't swim, and he offered to teach me.

I hesitated, knowing that Grandmother held strict and rather old-fashioned views about my mixing with village children; but, deciding that Grandfather—who sometimes smoked a hookah on the sly—would get me out of any trouble that might arise, I took the bold step of accepting

the boy's offer. And once taken, the step did not seem so very bold.

He dived off the back of his buffalo and swam across to me. And I, having removed my shirt and shorts, followed his instructions until I was floundering about among the water-lilies. His name was Ramu, and he promised to give me swimming lessons every afternoon; and so it was during the afternoons—especially summer afternoons when everyone was asleep—that we met.

Before long I was able to swim across the pond to sit with Ramu astride a contented buffalo, standing like an island in the middle of a muddy ocean. Sometimes we would try racing the buffaloes, Ramu and I sitting on different beasts.

But they were lazy creatures and would leave one comfortable spot only to look for another; or, if they were in no mood for games, would simply roll over on their backs, taking us with them into the mud and green slime of the pond. I would emerge from the pond in shades of green and khaki, slip into the house through the bathroom, and bathe under the tap before getting into my clothes.

Ramu came from a family of low-caste farmers and had received no schooling. But he was well-versed in folklore and knew a great deal about birds and animals.

"Many birds are sacred," he told me, as a bluejay swooped down from the peepul tree and carried off a grasshopper. Ramu said that both the bluejay and the god Shiva were called *Nilkanth*.

Shiva had a blue throat like the bird, because out of compassion for the human race, he had swallowed a deadly poison which was meant to destroy the world. Keeping the poison in his throat, he had not let it go further.

"Are squirrels sacred?" I asked.

"The god Krishna loved them," said Ramu. "He would take them in his arms and stroke them with his long fingers. That is why they have four dark lines down their backs from head to tail. Krishna was very dark, and the lines are the marks of his fingers."

Both Ramu and Grandfather felt that we should be more gentle with birds and animals, that we should not kill them indiscriminately.

"We must acknowledge their rights on the earth," said Grandfather. "Everywhere, birds and animals are finding it more difficult to live because we are destroying their forests. They have to keep moving as the trees disappear."

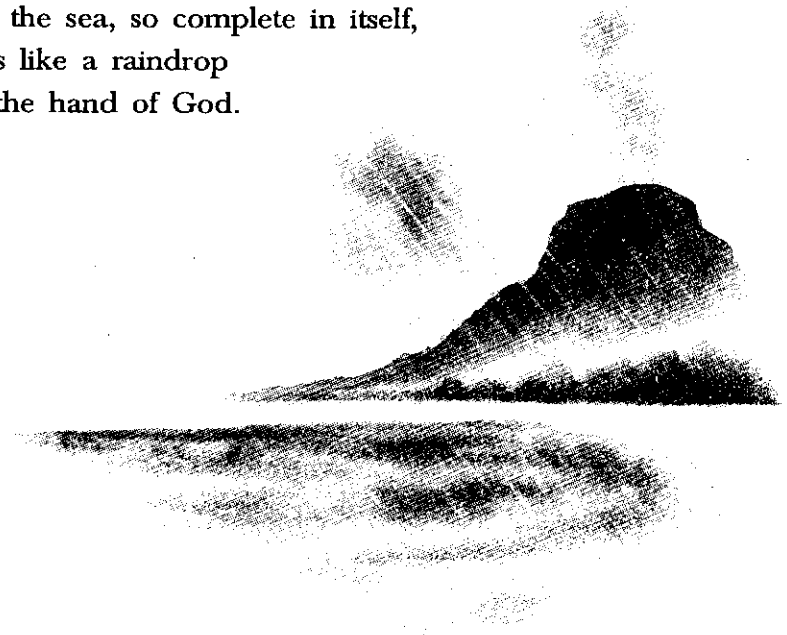
Ramu and I spent many long summer afternoons at the pond. We never saw each other again after I left my grandparents' house. He could not read or write, so we were unable to keep in touch. No one knew of our friendship.

Only the buffaloes and the frogs were our confidants. They had accepted us as part of their own world, their muddy but comfortable pond. And when I went away, both they and Ramu must have assumed that I would return again like the birds.



RAINDROP

This leaf, so complete in itself,
Is only part of a tree.
And this tree, so complete in itself,
Is only part of the mountain.
And the mountain runs down to the sea.
And the sea, so complete in itself,
Rests like a raindrop
On the hand of God.



THE NIGHT THE ROOF BLEW OFF



Looking back at the experience, I suppose it was the sort of the thing that should have happened in a James Thurber story, like the dam that burst or the ghost who got in. But I wasn't thinking of Thurber at the time, although a few of his books were among the many I was trying to save from the icy rain and sleet pouring into my bedroom and study.

We have grown accustomed to sudden storms up here at 7,000 ft in the Himalayan foothills, and the old building in which I live has, for over a hundred years, received the brunt of the wind and the rain as they sweep across the hills from the east. We'd lived in the building for over ten years without any untoward happening. It had even taken the shock of an earthquake without sustaining any major damage: it is difficult to tell the new cracks from the old.

It's a three-storey building, and I live on the top floor with my adopted family—three children and their parents. The roof consists of corrugated tin sheets, the ceiling of



But then the wind fell, and it began to snow.

wooden boards. That's the traditional hill-station roof. Ours had held fast in many a storm, but the wind that night was stronger than we'd ever known it. It was cyclonic in its intensity, and it came rushing at us with a high-pitched eerie wail. The old roof groaned and protested at the unrelieved pressure. It took this battering for several hours, while the rain lashed against the window, and the lights kept coming and going.

There was no question of sleeping but we remained in bed for warmth and comfort. The fire had long since gone out, the chimney stack having collapsed, bringing down a shower of sooty rain-water.

After about four hours of buffetting, the roof could take it no more. My bedroom faces east, so my portion of the roof was the first to go.

The wind got under it and kept pushing, until, with a ripping, groaning sound, the metal sheets shifted from their moorings, some of them dropping with claps like thunder onto the road below. 'So that's it,' I thought, 'nothing worse can happen. As long as the ceiling stays on, I'm not getting out of my bed. We'll pick up the roof in the morning.'

Icy water cascading down on my face made me change my mind in a hurry. Leaping from my bed, I found that much of the ceiling had gone too. Water was pouring onto my open typewriter—the typewriter that had been my trusted companion for close on thirty years—and onto the bedside radio, bed covers, and clothes cupboard. The only object that wasn't receiving any rain was the potted philodendron,

which could have done with a little watering.

Picking up my precious typewriter and abandoning the rest, I stumbled into the front sitting-room (cum library), only to find that a similar situation had developed there. Water was pouring through the wooden slats, raining down on the bookshelves. By now I had been joined by the children, who had come to rescue me. Their section of the roof hadn't gone as yet. Their parents were struggling to close a window which had burst open, letting in lashings of wind and rain.

"Save the books!" shouted Dolly, the youngest, and that became our rallying cry for the next hour or two. I have open shelves, vulnerable to borrowers as well as the floods. Dolly and her brothers picked up armfuls of books and carried them into their room. But the floor was now awash all over the apartment, so the books had to be piled on the beds. Dolly was helping me gather up some of my manuscripts when a large field rat leapt onto the desk in front of her. Dolly squealed and ran for the door.

"It's all right," said Mukesh, whose love of animals extends even to field rats. "He's only sheltering from the storm."

Big brother Rakesh whistled for our mongrel, Toby, but Toby wasn't interested in rats just then. He had taken shelter in the kitchen, the only dry spot in the house.

Two rooms were now practically roofless, and the sky was frequently lighted up for us by flashes of lightning. There were fireworks inside too, as water spluttered and crackled along a damaged electric wire. Presently, the lights

went out altogether, which in some ways made the house a safer place. Prem, the children's father, is at his best in an emergency, and he had already located and lit two kerosene lamps: so we continued to transfer books, papers and clothes to the children's room.

We noticed that the water on the floor was beginning to subside a little. "Where is it going?" asked Dolly, for we could see no outlet.

"Through the floor," said Mukesh. "Down to the rooms below."

He was right, too. Cries of consternation from our neighbours told us that they were now having their share of the flood.

Our feet were freezing because there hadn't been time to put on enough protective footwear, and in any case, shoes and slippers were now awash. Tables and chairs were also piled high with books. I hadn't realised the considerable size of my library until that night! The available beds were pushed into the driest corner of the children's room and there, huddled in blankets and quilts, we spent the remaining hours of the night while the storm continued to threaten further mayhem.

But then the wind fell, and it began to snow. Through the door to the sitting-room I could see snow-flakes drifting through the gaps in the ceiling, settling on picture frames, statuettes and miscellaneous ornaments. Mundane things like a glue-bottle and plastic doll took on a certain beauty when covered with soft snow. The clock on the wall had

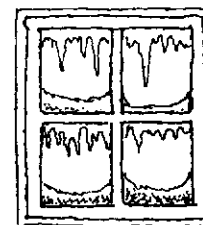
stopped and with its covering of snow reminded me of a painting by Salvador Dali. And my shaving-brush looked ready for use!

Most of us dozed off. I sensed that the direction of the wind had changed, and that it was now blowing from the west; it was making a rushing sound in the trees rather than in what remained of our roof. The clouds were scurrying away.


When dawn broke, we found the window-panes encrusted with snow and icicles. Then the rising sun struck through the gaps in the ceiling and turned everything to gold. Snow crystals glinted like diamonds on the empty bookshelves. I crept into my abandoned bedroom to find the philodendron looking like a Christmas tree.

Prem went out to find a carpenter and a tinsmith, while the rest of us started putting things in the sun to dry out. And by evening, we'd got much of the roof on again. Vacant houses are impossible to find in Mussoorie, so there was no question of moving.

But it's a much-improved roof now, and I look forward to the approaching winter with some confidence!



THE STOLEN DAFFODILS

 It was a foggy day in March that found me idling along Baker Street, with my hands in my pockets, a scarf wound round my neck, and two pairs of socks on my feet. The BBC had commissioned me to give a talk on village life in India, and, ambling along Baker Street in the fog, thinking of my talk, I realised I didn't really know much about village life in India. True, I could remember the smell of cow-dung smoke and the scent of jasmine, and the flood-waters lapping at the walls of mud houses, but I didn't know much about village electorates and that sort of thing. I was on the point of turning back and making my way to India House to get a few facts and figures, when I realised I wasn't on Baker Street any more. Wrapped in thought, I had wandered into Regent's Park. And now I wasn't sure of the way out.

A tall gentleman wearing a long grey cloak was stooping over a flower-bed, and going up to him, I said, "Excuse me, sir, can you tell me how I get out of here?"



He wore a peaked hunting-cap, and in one hand he held a large magnifying glass.

"How did you get in?" he asked me in an impatient voice, and when he turned and faced me, I received a severe shock. He wore a peaked hunting-cap, and in one hand he held a large magnifying glass. A long, curved pipe hung from his sensuous mouth. He possessed a long steely jaw, and his eyes had a fierce expression—they were bright with the intoxication of some drug.

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "You're Mr Sherlock Holmes!"

"And you, sir," he replied, with a flourish of his cloak, "are just out of India, unemployed, and due to give a lecture on the radio."

"But—but how did you know all that?" I stammered. "You've never seen me before. I suppose you know my name too?"

"Elementary, my dear Bond. The BBC notepaper in your hand, on which you have been scribbling, reveals your intention to give a talk. Your name is on the envelope, which you hold upside down behind it. It is ten o'clock in the morning, and if you were not unemployed you would be sitting in an office."

"And how do you know I'm from India?" I said, a trifle resentfully.

"Your accent betrays you," said Holmes with a superior smile.

I was about to turn away and leave him, when he laid a restraining hand on my shoulder.

"Stay a moment," he said. "Perhaps you can help me. I'm surprised at Watson. He promised to be here ten minutes

ago, but his wife must have kept him at home. Never marry, Bond. Women sap the intellect."

"In what way can I help you?" I asked, feeling flattered now that the great man had condescended to take me into his confidence.

"Take a look at this," said Holmes, going down on his knees near the flower-bed. "Do you notice anything odd?"

"Somebody's been pulling out daffodils," I said.

"Excellent, Bond! Your powers of observation are as good as Watson's. Now tell me, what else do you see?"

"The ground is a little trampled, that's all."

"By what?"

"A human foot. And—yes, a dog has been here too, it's been helping to dig up the bulbs!"

"You astonish me, Bond. You are quicker than I thought you were. Now shall I explain what all this is about? You see, for the past week, someone has been stealing daffodils from the park, and the authorities have asked me to deal with the matter. I think we shall catch our culprit this afternoon."

I was rather disappointed. "It isn't very dangerous, is it?"

"Ah, my dear Bond, the days are past when Ruritanian princes lost their diamonds, and duchesses their tiaras. There are no longer any Ruritanian princes in existence, and duchesses cannot afford tiaras. The more successful criminals have legalised their activities, and the East End has been cleaned up. And those cretins at Scotland Yard don't even believe in my existence!"

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "But who do you think is stealing the daffodils?"

"Obviously it is someone who owns a dog. Someone who takes a dog out regularly for a morning walk. That points to a woman. A woman in London is likely to keep a small dog—and judging from the animal's footprints, it must be either a Pekinese or a miniature Pomeranian. What I suggest, Bond, is that we conceal ourselves behind those bushes, and wait for the culprit to come along. She is sure to come again this morning. She has been stealing daffodils for the past week. And stealing daffodils, like smoking opium, becomes a habit."



Holmes and I crept behind the bushes, and settled down to a long wait. After half-an-hour our patience was rewarded. A large elderly woman in a green hat came walking stealthily across the grass, followed by a small white Pom on a lead. Holmes had been right! More than ever, I admired his brilliance. We waited until the woman began pulling daffodil plants out, and then Holmes leapt from the bushes.

"Ah, we have you, madam!" he cried, springing upon her so swiftly that she shrieked and dropped the daffodils. I sprang out after Holmes, but my effort was rewarded by a nip in the leg from the outraged Pomeranian.

Holmes held the woman by the shoulders. I don't know what frightened her more—being caught, or being confronted by that grim-visaged countenance, with its pipe, cloak and hunting-cap.

"Now, madam," he said firmly, "why were you stealing daffodils?"

She had begun to weep, and I thought Holmes was going to soften; he always did, when confronted by weeping women.

"I would be obliged, Bond, if you would call the park attendant," he said to me.

I hurried off towards a greenhouse, and after a brief search found a gardener.

"Stealing daffodils, is she?" he said, running up at the double, a dangerous-looking rake in one hand.

But when we got to the daffodil-bed, I couldn't find the lady anywhere. Nor was Holmes to be seen. I was overcome

by doubt and embarrassment. But then I looked at the ground, and saw a number of daffodils scattered about the place.

"Holmes must have taken her to the police," I said.

"Holmes," said the gardener. "Who's Holmes?"

"Sherlock Holmes, of course. The celebrated detective. Haven't you heard of him?"

The gardener looked at me with increasing alarm. "Sherlock Holmes, eh? And you'll be Dr Watson, I suppose?"

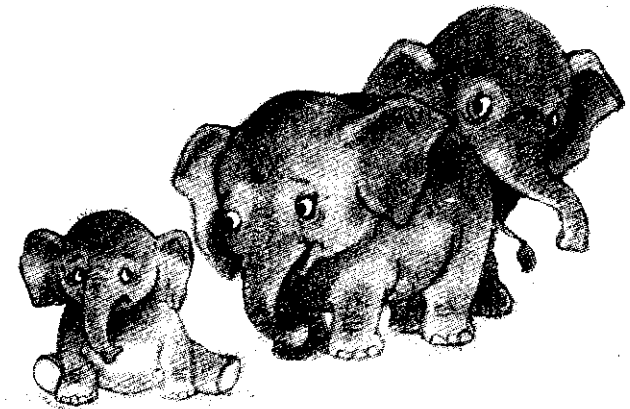
"Well, not exactly," I said; but before I could explain, the gardener had disappeared.

I found my way out of the Park eventually, feeling that Holmes had let me down a little; then, just as I was crossing Baker Street, I thought I saw him on the opposite curb. He was alone, looking up at a lighted room, and his arm was raised as though he was waving to someone. I thought I heard him shout 'Watson!' But I was not sure. I started to cross the road, but a big red bus came out of the fog in front of me, and I had to wait for it to pass. When the road was clear, I dashed across. But by that time Holmes had gone, and the rooms above were dark.



MAKE ROOM FOR ELEPHANTS

I know the world's a crowded place,
And elephants do take up space,
But if it makes a difference, Lord,
I'd gladly share my room and board.
A baby elephant would do. . . .
But, if he brings his mother too,
There's Dad's garage. He wouldn't mind.
To elephants he's more than kind.
But I wonder what our Mum would say
If the elephant's father came to stay!



WOULD ASTLEY RETURN?



The house was called 'Undercliff', because that's where it stood—under a cliff. The man who went away—the owner of the house—was Robert Astley. And the man who stayed behind—the old family retainer—was Prem Bahadur.

Astley had been gone many years. He was still a bachelor in his late thirties when he'd suddenly decided that he wanted adventure, romance, faraway places; and he'd given the keys of the house to Prem Bahadur—who'd served the family for thirty years—and had set off on his travels.

Someone saw him in Sri Lanka. He'd been heard of in Burma, around the ruby mines at Mogok. Then he turned up in Java, seeking a passage through the Sunda Straits. After that the trail petered out. Years passed. The house in the hill-station remained empty.

But Prem Bahadur was still there, living in an outhouse. Every day he opened up 'Undercliff', dusted the furniture in all the rooms, made sure that the bed-sheets and

pillowcases were clean, and set out Astley's dressing-gown and slippers.

In the old days, whenever Astley had come home after a journey or a long tramp in the hills, he had liked to bathe and change into his gown and slippers, no matter what the hour. Prem Bahadur still kept them ready. He was convinced that Robert would return one day.

Astley himself had said so.

"Keep everything ready for me, Prem, old chap. I may be back after a year, or two years, or even longer, but I'll be back, I promise you. On the first of every month I want you to go to my lawyer, Mr Kapoor. He'll give you your salary and any money that's needed for the rates and repairs. I want you to keep the house tip-top!"

"Will you bring back a wife, Sahib?"

"Lord, no! Whatever put that idea in your head?"

"I thought, perhaps—because you wanted the house kept ready. . . ."

"Ready for me, Prem. I don't want to come home and find the old place falling apart."

And so Prem had taken care of the house—although there was no news from Astley. What had happened to him? The mystery provided a talking-point whenever local people met on the Mall. And in the bazaar the shopkeepers missed Astley because he was a man who spent freely.

His relatives still believed him to be alive. Only a few months back a brother had turned up—a brother who had a firm in Canada and could not stay in India for long. He

had deposited a further sum with the lawyer and told Prem to carry on as before. The salary provided Prem with his few needs. Moreover, he was convinced that Robert would return.

Another man might have neglected the house and grounds, but not Prem Bahadur. He had a genuine regard for the absent owner. Prem was much older—now almost sixty and none too strong, suffering from pleurisy and other chest troubles—but he remembered Robert as both a boy and a young man. They had been together on numerous hunting and fishing trips in the mountains. They had slept out under the stars, bathed in icy mountain streams, and eaten from the same cooking-pot. Once, when crossing a small river, they had been swept downstream by a flash-flood, a wall of water that came thundering down the gorges without any warning during the rainy seasons. Together they had struggled back to safety. Back in the hill-station, Astley told everyone that Prem had saved his life; while Prem was equally insistent that he owed his life to Robert.

This year the monsoon had begun early and ended late. It dragged on through most of September, and Prem Bahadur's cough grew worse and his breathing more difficult.

He lay on his charpai on the verandah, staring out at the garden, which was beginning to get out of hand, a tangle of dahlias, snake-lilies and convolvulus. The sun finally came out. The wind shifted from the south-west to the north-west, and swept the clouds away.

Prem Bahadur had shifted his charpai into the garden,



"So you have come at last," said Prem.

and was lying in the sun, puffing at his small hookah, when he saw Robert Astley at the gate.

He tried to get up but his legs would not oblige him. The hookah slipped from his hand.

Astley came walking down the garden path and stopped in front of the old retainer, smiling down at him. He did not look a day older than when Prem Bahadur had last seen him.

"So you have come at last," said Prem.

"I told you I'd return."

"It has been many years. But you have not changed."

"Nor have you, old chap."

"I have grown old and sick and feeble."

"You'll be fine now. That's why I've come."

"I'll open the house," said Prem, and this time he found himself getting up quite easily.

"It isn't necessary," said Astley.

"But all is ready for you!"

"I know. I have heard of how well you have looked after everything. Come then, let's take a last look around. We cannot stay, you know."

Prem was a little mystified but he opened the front door and took Robert through the drawing-room and up the stairs to the bedroom. Robert saw the dressing-gown and the slippers, and he placed his hand gently on the old man's shoulder.

When they returned downstairs and emerged into the sunlight, Prem was surprised to see himself—or rather his

skinny body—stretched out on the charpai. The hookah lay on the ground, where it had fallen.

Prem looked at Astley in bewilderment.

"But who is that—lying there?"

"It was you. Only the husk now, the empty shell. This is the real you, standing here beside me."

"You came for me?"

"I couldn't come until you were ready. As for me, I left my shell a long time ago. But you were determined to hang on, keeping this house together. Are you ready now?"

"And the house?"

"Others will live in it. But come, it's time to go fishing."

Astley took Prem by the arm, and they walked through the dappled sunlight under the deodars and finally left that place forever.



THE OVERCOAT



It was clear frosty weather, and as the moon came up over the Himalayan peaks, I could see that patches of snow still lay on the roads of the hill-station. I would have been quite happy in bed, with a book, a hot-water bottle and possibly a glass of brandy at my side, but I'd promised the Kapadias that I'd come to their party, and I felt it would be churlish of me to stay away. I put on two sweaters, an old football scarf and an overcoat, and set off down the moonlit road.

It was a walk of just over a mile to the Kapadia's house, and I had covered about half the distance when I saw a girl standing in the middle of the road.

She must have been sixteen to seventeen. She looked rather old-fashioned—long hair hanging to her waist, and a flummoxed sequined dress, pink and lavender, that reminded me of the pictures in my grandfather's family album. When I came closer, I noticed that she had lovely eyes and a winning smile.

"Good evening," I said. "It's a cold night to be out."

"Are you going to the party?" she asked.

"That's right. And I can see from your lovely dress that you're going too. Come along, we're nearly there."

She fell into step beside me and we soon saw lights from the Kapadia's house shining brightly through the deodars. The girl told me her name was Julie. I hadn't seen her before, but then, I'd only been in the hill-station a few months.

There was quite a crowd at the party, and no one seemed to know Julie. Everyone thought she was a friend of mine. I did not deny it. Obviously she was someone who was feeling lonely and wanted to be with friendly people. And she was certainly enjoying herself. I did not see her do much eating or drinking, but she flitted about from one group to another, talking, listening, laughing; and when the music began, she was dancing almost continuously, alone or with partners, it didn't matter which, she was completely wrapped up in the music.

It was almost midnight when I got up to go. I had drunk a fair amount of rum punch, and I was ready for my bed. As I was saying goodnight to my hosts and wishing everyone a merry Christmas, Julie slipped her arm into mine and said she'd be going home too.

When we were outside I said, "Where do you live, Julie?"

"At Wolfsburn," she said. "Right at the top of the hill."

"There's a cold wind," I said. "And although your dress is beautiful, it doesn't look very warm. Here, you'd better



Then she disappeared up the hill, and I went home alone.

wear my overcoat. I've plenty of protection."

She did not protest, and allowed me to slip my overcoat over her shoulders. Then we started out on the walk home. But I did not have to escort her all the way. At about the spot where we had met she said, "There's a short cut from there. I'll just scramble up the hillside."

"Do you know it well?" I asked. "It's a very narrow path."

"Oh, I know every stone on the path. I use it all the time. And besides, it's a really bright night."

"Well, keep the coat on," I said. "I can collect it tomorrow."

She hesitated a moment, then smiled and nodded to me. Then she disappeared up the hill, and I went home alone.

The next day I walked up to Wolfsburn. I crossed a little brook, from which the house had probably got its name, and entered an open iron gate. But of the house itself little remained. Just a roofless ruin, a pile of stones, a shattered chimney, a few doric pillars where a verandah had once stood.

Had Julie played a joke on me? Or had I found the wrong house?

I walked around the hill, to the mission house where the Taylors lived and asked old Mrs Taylor if she knew a girl called Julie.

"No, I don't think so," she said. "Where does she live?"

"At Wolfsburn, I was told. But the house is just a ruin."

"Nobody's lived at Wolfsburn for over forty years. The



Mackinnons lived there. One of the old families who settled here. But when their girl died . . .” She stopped and gave me a queer look. “I think her name was Julie. . . . Anyway, when she died, they sold the house and it fell into decay. But it couldn’t be the same Julie you’re looking for. She died of consumption—their wasn’t much you could do about it in those days. Her grave is in the cemetery, just down the road.”

I thanked Mrs Taylor and walked slowly down the road to the cemetery; not really wanting to know any more, but propelled forward almost against my will.

It was a small cemetery under the deodars. You could see the eternal snows of the Himalayas standing out against

the pristine blue of the sky. Here lay the bones of forgotten Empire-builders—soldiers, merchants, adventurers, their wives and children. . . . It did not take me long to find Julie’s grave. It had a simple headstone with her name clearly outlined on it:

Julie Mackinnon

1923-39

‘With us one moment,

Taken the next,

Gone to her Maker,

Gone to her rest.’

Although many monsoons had swept across the cemetery, wearing down the stones, they had not touched this little tombstone.

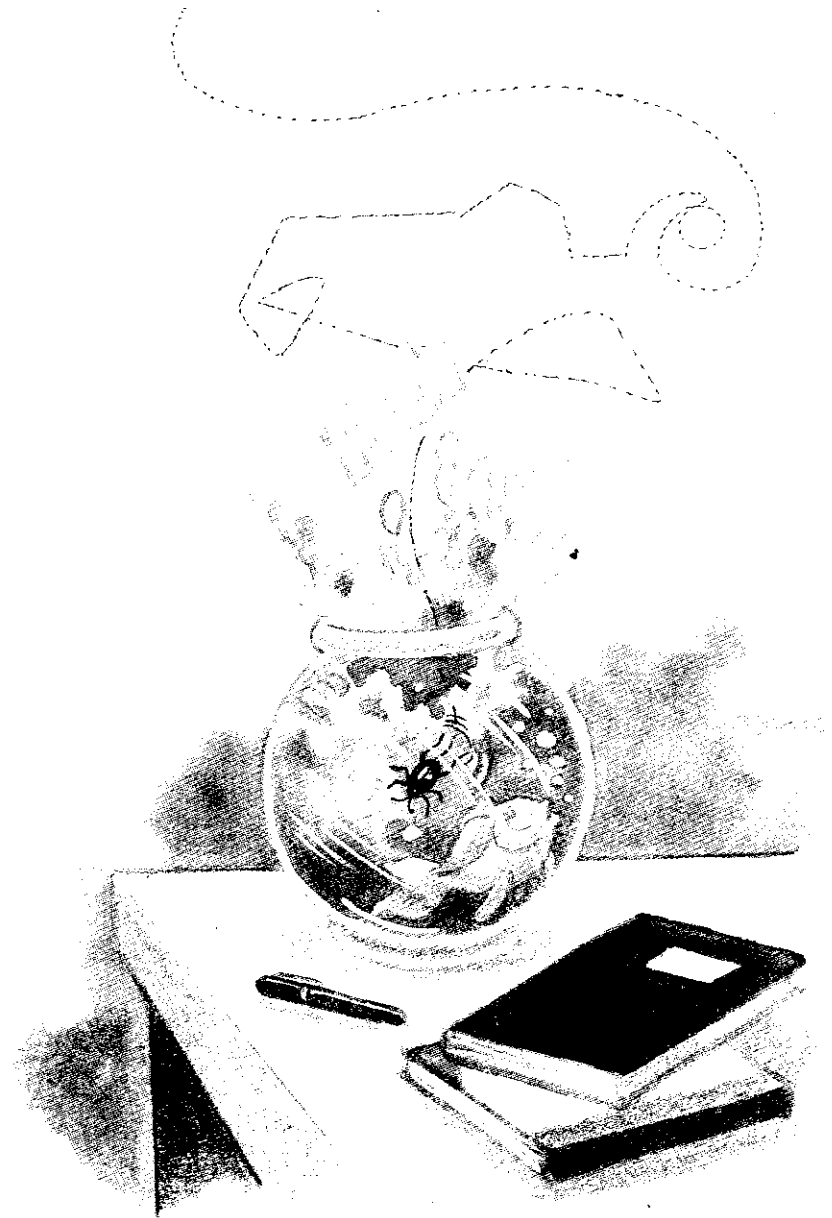
I was turning to leave when I caught a glimpse of something familiar behind the headstone. I walked round to where it lay.

Neatly folded on the grass was my overcoat.



GOD SAVE THE BEETLE

Lord, please give some sense of direction to this beetle
Who keeps blundering through the open window
And falling into the goldfish bowl.
Twice I have kept him from drowning
And returned him to the garden;
But he keeps coming back
Zooming and diving about the room, until
P-L-O-P!
He's in the goldfish bowl again,
Swimming round and round and looking very tired.
In five minutes' time I must go to bed
And if you don't get this beetle
To look after himself, who will?
Besides, it makes the goldfish nervous.



If Mice Could Roar

If mice could roar
And elephants soar
And trees grow up in the sky,
If tigers could dine
On biscuits and wine,
And the fattest of men could fly!
If pebbles could sing
And bells never ring
And teachers got lost in the post;
If a tortoise could run
And losses be won,
And bullies be buttered on toast;
If a song brought a shower,
And a gun grew a flower,
This world would be nicer than most!

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